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Effects of a misled understanding of 'Mastery'

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'Mastery' is one of the key components to intrinsic motivation [1] and an essential principle in lean-agile environments ("Pursue perfection" [2], "Continuous attention to technical excellence" [3]). What happens if leaders are misinterpreting 'Mastery' while thinking it was still agile? This contribution is based on observations at a business unit of a large German enterprise.

Mastery as a lean/agile principle means to provide an environment that reinforces learning and gives people the chance to learn by experimenting with freedom to fail and learn out of it. It implies the psychological safety of not being blamed or punished for making mistakes. The benefit from such culture is a relentlessly improving and learning organization where employees are allowed and encouraged to develop themselves in topics they are interested in. Such a culture motivates people to develop themselves towards personal mastery (technical or methodological excellence).

However, if leaders don't have that deep understanding of 'Mastery' they could easily mix it up with the idea to have an organization with only excellent people on board ('the best'). But 'Mastery' in the previously described sense is more about the way than the goal. If the leader of an organization focuses on aggregating 'the best' people without respecting current people and the process of developing them to excellence, he/she is likely to cause a cascade of dysfunctions:

1) The company's human resources strategy will be to hire only the 'best people' which are also the most expensive. The dysfunction comes with the natural limitation of 'best people': The organization needs more of them than available (on the employees' market). In turn the hired people are defined to be 'the best' which put lots of pressure on them. This is increased by the high expectations of the Executive Board which has the believe that a company full of 'best people' should be outstandingly performing.

2) The expectation of having on organization with only the best people puts high pressure to them (see issue 1). This reinforces the fear of errors which leads to a culture of hiding errors, blaming others (finger pointing) and avoiding decision-making since decisions could be wrong. Caution: Avoiding decisions may not be mixed up with the agile principle 'late decisions'.

3) The effects of issue 2) consequently prevent any fruitful organizational learning. The people are permanently overloaded by management. In turn there's less chance to develop mastery.

What are the cultural key interventions against theses dysfunctions? Over all you must gain control over operational work load:

- Create transparency by means of Kanban boards [5]
- Make the boards visible and actively show to managers
- After visualizing the work load, introduce work in progress limits: this will force management to become aware of the overload and to short down expectations

After having control over the work load You need to focus on the lean principle 'built-in-quality' [4]. This is a key driver for both technical excellence and more self-confidence in the team. The latter will help to overcome the fear of decision-making.

[1] Pink, Daniel H.. Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us. Canongate Books, 2010.

[2] Womack, James P.. Lean Thinking: Banish Waste and Create Wealth in Your Corporation. Free Press, 2003.

[3] Agile Manifesto: Principles. http://agilemanifesto.org/principles.html

[4] Poppendieck, Mary. Implementing Lean Software Development: From Concept to Cash (Addison-Wesley Signature Series (Beck)). Pearson Education, 2007.

[5] Burrows, Mike. Kanban from the Inside: Understand the Kanban Method, connect it to what you already know, introduce it with impact. Blue Hole Press, 2014.